

## UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT

## DISTRICT OF NEVADA

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UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,

Case No. 3:17-cr-00104-LRH-CLB

Respondent/Plaintiff,

ORDER

v.

ANDREW DENG PHAM,

Petitioner/Defendant.

Before the Court is petitioner Andrew Deng Pham's ("Pham") motion, to vacate, set aside, or correct his sentence pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 2255 (ECF No. 51). Pham filed his motion considering the recent ruling in *Rehaif v. United States*, 139 S. Ct. 2191 (2019). The government opposes (ECF No. 53), arguing that Pham's claims are procedurally barred because he did not raise them on direct appeal. In his reply (ECF No. 54), Pham maintains that the constitutional errors are structural.

For the reasons contained within this Order, the Court denies Pham's motion and denies him a certificate of appealability.

# **I. BACKGROUND**

Pham has an extensive criminal history dating back to 1995. Most notably, in 2007, Pham was convicted of attempted murder. After serving almost nine years for that conviction, he was paroled in September of 2016.

The current motion relates to Pham's conduct on October 20, 2017, when West Wendover Police officers responded to a report at a local casino of two men attempting to cash fraudulent

1 checks and who might be in possession of a firearm. After seeing Pham and another individual at  
 2 the check cashing counter, the officers approached. Upon searching Pham, the officers found a  
 3 loaded Glock, Model 33, .357 handgun in his waistband. Pham was still on parole for his attempted  
 4 homicide conviction from 2007.

5 In August 2018, per a plea agreement, Pham pleaded guilty to Unlawful Possession of a  
 6 Firearm by a Previously Convicted Felon. ECF No. 38. This Court sentenced Pham to 42 months'  
 7 imprisonment followed by three years of supervised release. ECF Nos. 45, 46. Now, Pham seeks  
 8 to vacate his sentence pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 2255.

## 9 **II. LEGAL STANDARD**

10 Pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 2255, a petitioner may file a motion requesting the court which  
 11 imposed sentence to vacate, set aside, or correct the sentence. 28 U.S.C. § 2255(a). Such a motion  
 12 may be brought on the following grounds: (1) "the sentence was imposed in violation of the  
 13 Constitution or laws of the United States;" (2) "the court was without jurisdiction to impose such  
 14 sentence;" (3) "the sentence was in excess of the maximum authorized by law;" or (4) the sentence  
 15 "is otherwise subject to collateral attack." *Id.*; see *United States v. Berry*, 624 F.3d 1031, 1038 (9th  
 16 Cir. 2010). When a petitioner seeks relief pursuant to a right newly recognized by a decision of  
 17 the United States Supreme Court, a one-year statute of limitations applies. 28 U.S.C. §  
 18 2255(f). That one-year limitation period begins to run from "the date on which the right asserted  
 19 was initially recognized by the Supreme Court." *Id.* § 2255(f)(3).

20 On June 21, 2019, the Supreme Court decided *Rehaif*, overturning established Ninth Circuit  
 21 precedent. 139 S. Ct. 2191. In the past, the government was only required to prove that a defendant  
 22 knowingly possessed a firearm under 18 U.S.C. §§ 922(g) and 924(a)(2). *Id.* at 2200. Now, under  
 23 *Rehaif*, the government "must prove both that the defendant knew he possessed a firearm and that  
 24 he knew that he belonged to the relevant category of persons barred from possessing a firearm."  
 25 *Id.*

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(reiterating *Lamar*). Quite importantly, the Ninth Circuit and decisions within the District of Nevada have relied on the principle announced in *Cotton* in cases considering the aftermath of *Rehaif*. See, e.g., *United States v. Espinoza*, 816 F. App'x 82, 84 (9th Cir. 2020) (“[T]he indictment's omission of the knowledge of status requirement did not deprive the district court of jurisdiction.”); see also *United States v. Miller*, Case No. 3:15-cr-00047-HDM-WGC (D. Nev. Dec. 8, 2020); *United States v. Baustamante*, Case No. 2:16-cr-00268-APG-CWH (D. Nev. Dec. 7, 2020).

Therefore, pursuant to Ninth Circuit precedent and decisions in this District, the Court had and continues to have jurisdiction over Pham’s case despite *Rehaif*.

### C. Procedural Default

The government also argues that Pham’s claims are procedurally defaulted. ECF No. 53, at 6. While a defendant certainly can question the underlying legality of his sentence or conviction, one who does not on direct appeal is procedurally defaulted from doing so unless they can demonstrate: (1) cause and prejudice; or (2) actual innocence. See *Bousley v. U.S.*, 523 U.S. 614, 622 (1998) (citations omitted). “‘Cause’ is a legitimate excuse for the default; ‘prejudice’ is actual harm resulting from the alleged constitutional violation.” *Magby v. Wawrzaszek*, 741 F.2d 240, 244 (9th Cir. 1984).

Pham did not challenge the validity of the indictment and/or plea on direct appeal, but instead, argues his claims have not procedurally defaulted because he can demonstrate cause and prejudice, or, in the alternative, the omission in his indictment is a structural error and therefore only requires a showing of cause. Each argument is addressed in turn.

#### 1. Cause

Pham can likely demonstrate cause. *Rehaif* overturned long standing precedent in the Ninth Circuit, and the decision’s constitutional consequences were not “reasonably available to counsel.” *Reed v. Ross*, 468 U.S. 1, 16 (1984).

#### 2. Prejudice

Still, Pham cannot demonstrate prejudice. The Ninth Circuit has found in numerous scenarios, that even if a defendant had been aware that the Government would need to prove the

knowledge-of-status element, there is no reasonable probability that the outcome would have been different. *See United States v. Espinoza*, 816 F. App'x 82, 84 (9th Cir. 2020) (holding that “the failure of the indictment and plea colloquy to include the element of knowledge of felon status does not require us to vacate [the] conviction...”); *United States v. Schmidt*, 792 F. App'x 521, 522 (9th Cir. 2020) (“Although [defendant] did not argue below that the government was required to prove [defendant] knew he was a felon, under any standard of review there was overwhelming evidence that [defendant] knew he was a felon when he possessed the firearms at issue in this case.”); *United States v. Tuan Ngoc Luong*, 965 F.3d 973, 989 (9th Cir. 2020) (finding in the trial context that, “even if the district court had instructed the jury on the knowledge-of-status element, there is no reasonable probability that the jury would have reached a different verdict...”). In other words, the Ninth Circuit has repeatedly found no actual harm resulted from alleged constitutional violations stemming from the decision in *Rehaif* in cases involving comparable facts to Pham’s

Here, Pham admitted to being a previously convicted felon at the time he possessed the weapon. ECF No. 39, at 3. In addition, Pham was on parole for attempted murder at the time of his arrest after serving nine years in prison. The Court is not persuaded the inclusion of the *Rehaif* element would have changed Pham’s decision to plead guilty or that his plea was involuntary. It seems clear Pham would have known he had been convicted of crimes for which he could be sentenced to more than a year imprisonment.

Accordingly, there is no reasonable probability, but for the *Rehaif* error, that the outcome of the proceeding would have been different. Therefore, because Pham has not demonstrated both cause and prejudice, he procedurally defaulted on his claims challenging the legality of his conviction.

#### **D. Structural Error**

Alternatively, Pham argues the constitutional errors are structural, therefore only requiring a showing of cause. “[C]ertain errors, termed structural errors, might affect substantial rights regardless of their actual impact on an appellant’s trial.” *United States v. Marcus*, 560 U.S. 258, 263 (2010) (citations omitted). Structural errors go to the very heart of the trial and are not “simply an error in the trial process itself.” *Arizona v. Fulimante*, 499 U.S. 279, 310 (1991).

1 While the Ninth Circuit has not decided whether the knowledge-of-status element in *Rehaif*  
 2 presents issues of structural error, numerous other circuits have concluded it does not. *See United*  
 3 *States v. Nasir*, 2020 WL 7041357, at \*19, n.30 (3d Cir. Dec. 1, 2020); *United States v. Coleman*,  
 4 961 F.3d 1024, 1030 (8th Cir. 2020); *United States v. Payne*, 964 F.3d 652, 657 (7th Cir. 2020);  
 5 *United States v. Lavalais*, 960 F.3d 180, 187 (5th Cir. 2020); *United States v. Trujillo*, 960 F.3d  
 6 1196, 1207 (10th Cir. 2020).

7 The Court agrees with these circuit courts and concludes that *Rehaif* likely does not involve  
 8 the limited class of errors the Supreme Court has deemed structural.

### 9 **E. Certificate of Appealability is Denied**

10 To proceed with an appeal of this Order, Pham must receive a certificate of appealability  
 11 from the Court. 28 U.S.C. § 2253(c)(1); FED. R. APP. P. 22; 9TH CIR. R. 22-1; *Allen v. Ornoski*,  
 12 435 F.3d 946, 950-951 (9th Cir. 2006). For the Court to grant a certificate of appealability, the  
 13 petitioner must make "a substantial showing of the denial of a constitutional right." 28 U.S.C. §  
 14 2253(c)(2); *Slack v. McDaniel*, 529 U.S. 473, 483-84 (2000). And the petitioner bears the burden  
 15 of demonstrating that the issues are debatable among reasonable jurists; that a court could resolve  
 16 the issues differently; or that the issues are "adequate to deserve encouragement to proceed  
 17 further." *Slack*, 529 U.S. at 483-84 (citation omitted).

18 As discussed above, Pham has failed to raise a meritorious challenge to his conviction and  
 19 sentence pursuant to Ninth Circuit's decisions following *Rehaif*. As such, the Court finds that he  
 20 has failed to demonstrate that reasonable jurists would find the Court's assessment of his claims  
 21 debatable or wrong. *See Allen*, 435 F.3d at 950–51. Therefore, the Court denies Pham a certificate  
 22 of appealability.

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1 **IV. CONCLUSION**

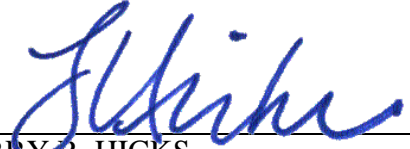
2 IT IS THEREFORE ORDERED that Pham's motion to vacate, set aside, or correct his  
3 sentence pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 2255 (ECF No. 51) is **DENIED**.

4 IT IS FURTHER ORDERED that a certificate of appealability is **DENIED**.

5 IT IS FURTHER ORDERED that the Clerk of Court **ENTER** a separate and final  
6 Judgment denying Pham's § 2255 motion. *See Kingsbury v. United States*, 900 F.3d 1147, 1150  
7 (9th Cir. 2018).

8 IT IS SO ORDERED.

9 DATED this 6th day of January, 2021.

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11 LARRY R. HICKS  
12 UNITED STATES DISTRICT JUDGE  
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